

Talking to officials

Guidelines on how coaches and players may seek to obtain clarification of officials' decisions during a game without attracting a penalty.

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Relevant rules

3-3-4-e Charged Team Timeouts

A player, incoming substitute or head coach may request a head coach's conference with the referee, if the coach believes a rule has been enforced improperly. If the rule enforcement is not changed, the coach's team will be charged a timeout, or a delay penalty if all timeouts have been used.

1. Only the referee may stop the clock for a head coach's conference.
2. A request for a head coach's conference must be made before the ball is snapped or free-kicked for the next play and before the end of the second or fourth period (Rules 5-2-10 and 11-1-1).
3. After a head coach's conference, the full team timeout is granted if charged by the referee.

9-2-1 Unsportsmanlike Acts

There shall be no unsportsmanlike conduct or any act that interferes with orderly game administration on the part of players, substitutes, coaches, authorised attendants or any other persons subject to the rules, before the game, during the game or between periods.

a. Specifically prohibited acts and conduct include:

1. No player, substitute, coach or other person subject to the rules shall use abusive, threatening or obscene language or gestures, or engage in such acts that provoke ill will or are demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game, including but not limited to:
 - (a) Pointing the finger(s), hand(s), arm(s) or ball at an opponent, or imitating the slashing of the throat.
 - (b) Taunting, baiting or ridiculing an opponent verbally.
 - (c) Inciting an opponent or spectators in any other way, such as simulating the firing of a weapon or placing a hand by the ear to request recognition.
 - (d) Any delayed, excessive, prolonged or choreographed act by which a player (or players) attempts to focus attention upon himself (or themselves).
 - (e) Obviously altering stride as an unopposed runner approaches the opponent's goal line, or diving into the end zone when unopposed.
 - (f) Removal of a player's helmet before he is in the team area (**Exceptions:** Team, media or injury timeouts; equipment adjustment; through play; between periods; and during a measurement for a first down).
 - (g) Punching one's own chest or crossing one's arms in front of the chest while standing over a prone player.
 - (h) Going into the stands to interact with spectators, or bowing at the waist after a good play.
2. After a score or any other play the player in possession immediately must return the ball

to an official or leave it near the dead-ball spot. This prohibits:

- (a) Kicking, throwing, spinning or carrying (including off of the field) the ball any distance that requires an official to retrieve it.
- (b) Spiking the ball to the ground (**Exception:** A forward pass to conserve time (Rule 7-3-2-d)).
- (c) Throwing the ball high into the air.
- (d) Any other unsportsmanlike act or actions that delay the game.

PENALTY -

Dead-ball foul. 15 yards [S7, S27] from the succeeding spot. Flagrant offenders, if players or substitutes, shall be disqualified [S47]. If a player or an identified squad member in uniform commits two unsportsmanlike fouls in the same game, he shall be disqualified.

b. Other prohibited acts include:

1. During the game, coaches, substitutes and authorised attendants in the team area shall not be on the field of play or outside the 25-yard lines without permission from the referee unless legally entering or leaving the field (**Exception:** Rules 1-2-4-h and 3-3-8-c). Team area personnel who are outside the team area and who have involvement or impact on live-ball play are subject to penalty under Rule 9-1-4-a.
2. No disqualified player shall enter the field of play or end zones.
3. No person or mascot subject to the rules, except players, officials and eligible substitutes, shall be on the field of play or end zones during any period without permission from the referee. If a player is injured, attendants may come inbounds to attend him, but they must obtain recognition from an official.
4. No substitute(s) may enter the field of play or end zones for purposes other than replacing a player(s) or to fill a player vacancy(ies). This includes demonstrations after any play (A.R. 9-2-1:I)
5. Persons subject to the rules, including bands, shall not create any noise that prohibits a team from hearing its signals. (Rule 1-1-6)

PENALTY -

Dead-ball foul. 15 yards [S7, S27] from the succeeding spot. Flagrant offenders, if players or substitutes, shall be disqualified [S47].

There are three situations where we legitimately want to allow coaches and players to ask questions of the officials:

1. where the head coach believes that a rule has been improperly enforced
2. where the head coach or a captain genuinely does not understand a ruling (but is not seeking to have it changed)
3. where the head coach or a captain wants to know how much time is remaining

Conversely, we do not want to detract from the game by:

1. permitting conduct that demeans the officials (e.g. by expressions of dissent with their decisions)
2. delaying the game unnecessarily or repeatedly
3. allowing any or every Tom, Dick or Harry to interrupt the officials' normal duties and concentration

The first situation is clearly dealt with by the procedure laid down in Rule 3-3-4-e. Generally, this works well in British football, though it could be improved by players and coaches

explicitly requesting a coach's conference, rather than simply requesting a timeout. It is the second and third situations that we need guidelines to address.

From the unsportsmanlike conduct rule, it is clear that for a player or coach to address an official about a ruling (or anything else):

- Except for players, they cannot come on to the field or go beyond the 25-yard lines to do it (without permission from the referee).
- They cannot use abusive, threatening or obscene language or gestures.
- They cannot do anything that provokes ill will or is demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game.

Also, based on other rules, they cannot:

- Stop the 25-second clock (if it has started) other than by calling a team timeout.

This means that queries are best raised while the game clock is stopped and the officials are not otherwise engaged (e.g. during team timeouts, injury timeouts, the interval between periods, and the gap between a score and the subsequent kickoff).

Queries should be expressed as genuine questions. Ironic or sarcastic questions are not acceptable (they provoke ill will).

Normally, only the head coach or one captain should be addressing the officials. However, it is perfectly reasonable for an assistant coach or another member of sideline personnel to act on the head coach's behalf, as long as it is clear that he is doing so. Similarly, a player may act on behalf of his captain. The crucial thing is that only one person should be talking to an official at a time, and that multiple voices if not controlled tend to lead to undesirable situations.

The official who hears the question must make one of three decisions:

1. whether to ignore the question because the ball is about to become live, in which case he should address the questioner at the next available opportunity
2. whether to immediately answer the question
3. whether to state that he will answer the question at the next available opportunity (and make sure he does so)

Normally the official should be able to answer the question himself. Occasionally he may need to bring the question to the referee's notice, or get information from another official (e.g. the timekeeper for timing questions).

Answers should be factual. Common phrases to use include "in my judgement ...", "by rule ...", "what the rulebook says is ..." and "what my colleague saw was...". Whenever one team is told the time, the other team should be told it as well.

Follow-up questions are OK, provided time is not an issue.

Under what circumstances should an official halt the game in order to answer a question?

1. Except in the situation where an official believes there is a reasonable chance that a rule has not been properly enforced, only the referee should halt the game.
2. Referees should seek to pre-empt questions on unusual rules situations by explaining them either via the microphone or by informing the coaches (personally or via the wing officials) or captains (personally).
3. Otherwise, the Referee should only halt the game in extreme situations where failing to do so might lead to loss of decorum by players and/or coaches. In this case, if the Referee answers a question raised by one team, he should ensure that the other team is also

informed what is going on (either personally, or via the wing official on that side of the field).

The coach's conference procedure should only be used to query errors in rules application. It cannot be used to question the officials' judgement. For example, it is OK to use it when the officials march off 10 yards when it should only be a 5-yard penalty, when they apply postscrimmage kick enforcement when it doesn't properly apply, or even if they think the officials have forgotten the rule that players blocked into the catcher have not committed kick catch interference. It is not appropriate to use a coaches conference to disagree about whether contact between players constituted pass interference, or whether the pass was catchable, or whether the holding call affected the play or not. Those are examples of judgement calls.

What can a head coach do to help the officials?

1. Adopt and enforce a team policy that limits the number of assistant coaches and players who the coach authorises to speak to the officials. If someone who is not authorised does speak to the officials, his coach or teammates should remind him of his team's policy.
2. Not ask questions at times when the officials are obviously busy, or when the ball is about to be made live.
3. Address questions to the nearest official, not the Referee. (However, we appreciate that occasionally, due to various factors, the nearest official is not able to provide an answer.)
4. Use the coaches' conference procedure in Rule 3-3-4-e whenever he genuinely believes the officials have enforced a rule improperly.
5. Never complain to one official about another official.
6. Keep an even temper and not use words, volume or gestures that might be judged (by either the official or, more importantly, by spectators) as provocative or antagonistic.

Note that a team that does not have any timeouts remaining can still request a coach's conference. If their challenge is not successful, they are penalised 5 yards for delay of game.

What can officials do to help themselves?

1. Wing officials should maintain a good rapport with the coach. That doesn't mean making yourself over-familiar with him.
2. Giving the coach information *before he asks for it* whenever possible.
3. If an official believes a rule has been applied incorrectly, *he* should stop the game and bring it to the Referee's attention, not tell the coach to!
4. When play has been halted to answer a question, there should always be two officials present at the discussion with the coach. This is to minimise the possibility of the wrong information being passed and, in the rare instance where the coach is abusive, to act as a witness to the abuse.